

# passage from india

Worldwide interest in contemporary Indian art is booming, in line with the region's growth and confidence. **Farah Rahim Ismail** celebrates the emergence of a vibrant and distinctive voice on the global stage

India, as is often said, provides visitors with an assault on the senses. The cacophony of sounds, the psychedelic visual chaos and the dichotomy between urban and rural, truths and falsities, old and new rich and poor, all co-exist alongside a diversity of religions and over 26 languages, against a powerful heritage formed by various ruling cultures. With such multi-layered dynamics, it should come as no surprise that contemporary art from the region cannot be pigeonholed with sweeping statements about schools or groups. But the constant negotiation between tradition and modernity has resulted in some of the most interesting art being produced anywhere in the world today. The energetic transitions of the country, and the cultural complexities arising from globalisation, are reflected in the ideas artists seek to communicate. And they are doing so in exciting, individual ways and in diverse media, which are not just determined by ethnicity. The broad range of art being produced now transcends clichéd, romanticised notions of India.

Outside the country, there are some fixed perceptions of Indian art, probably because of India's strong legacy of introspective, narrative subject matter, and a timeline of Modernism different to the Western model. Today, traditions persist, but experimentation with contemporary vocabulary has been pushing the boundaries for some time. What the West may perceive as new developments are not that new - it is simply that there has been a dearth of exhibitions and information about current work on the international scene. But that, thankfully, is now changing. In my former role as Director of Aicon Gallery in London (a platform dedicated to contemporary South Asian art), I recall the eve of the gallery's launch in March 2007. When a well-known figure in the contemporary art world paid a visit he confessed that he had been half-expecting to see 'large blue elephants on the wall'. On walking into the space he was surprised to be greeted by several politically charged works (installations in wood and paintings) by leading artist Ravi Varma. 'This is a language I can understand', the distinguished visitor explained, a little embarrassed by his preconceptions. But his reaction is indicative of views that still exist.

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The particular energy of much contemporary Indian art comes from the injection of local, hybrid concerns into the multi-disciplinary practices of the international art world. Subodh Gupta, the most prominent artist in India today, elevates everyday objects and symbols of rural India in his instantly recognisable pieces. Since 2005, he has constructed installations from an array of stainless steel kitchen utensils and paraphernalia, which glint and reflect ideas of aspiration, consumerism and emptiness. His *Very Hungry God* (2006) - an enormous skull made of sparkling aluminium pots and pans - wowed the crowds at last year's Venice Biennale with its expression of insatiable appetites and greed. Gupta's choice of materials and his subject matter starkly allude to social complexities in India by preserving various local tools of survival. From the cow dung in his video work *Pure* (2000) - an interpretation of a ritualistic performance - to the recreation of vehicles such as the family scooter, bicycles and airport trolleys that comment on an upwardly mobile class, his work glorifies India's dignity and beauty.





Riyas Komu's diverse and powerful body of work, resonant with socio-political overtones, has garnered accolades both at home and internationally. Born in 1971 into a large Kerala family, Komu was steeped in politics early on. Kerala was the first Indian state to form a democratically elected communist government in 1970 and is religiously diverse: his father was a leading trade unionist with strong leftist leanings, but also a Muslim. Komu's work evokes conflicts of politics and religion and a curiosity about belief systems. In paintings, he pays tribute to downtrodden and displaced immigrant communities, honouring their endurance of spirit against all odds: hints of anguish are overshadowed by echoes of hope and human values. In a range of new work he looks at the effects of the Iraq War and globalisation, employing a range of symbolic elements to convey how invasions meant to advance civilisation have in fact destroyed it. He brings these ideas into a contemporary context in *Watching the Other World Spirits from the Gardens of Babylon* (2008), raising questions about the cost of human lives, the environment and 'progress'.

'their creations are complex, multi-layered'

Contemporary artists like Subodh Gupta and Riyas Komu are among a group of immediately recognisable names on the international scene, renowned for the strength and diversity of their work. These artists, and others, are using multi- and inter-disciplinary techniques to charge their voices and reflect their unique perspective on the transitory nature of their environment. Their creations are complex, multi-layered narratives conveying strong opinions, and employing new vocabularies in reaction to the turmoil of socio-economic and political shifts in India and in the world at large. In their work there is no self-consciousness about 'being Indian', but rather a confident use of political and social references and formerly taboo subject matter, untrapped by exoticism.

Prohibited subject matter is expressed in works by artists Tejal Shah, Abir Karmakar and Sonia Khurana, who all use their bodies to address issues of sexuality and myth. Working in video and new media, conceptual artist Shilpa Gupta probes into human rights abuse and militarism. New Delhi-based Atul Bhalla delves into a number of themes including the physical, historical, religious and political associations of water. The

treatment of this life-giving 'free' source in India is explored in his grid-formed photography of public water taps, for example *MCD Taps* (2007). *Wash/Water/Blood* (2007) explores its use in rituals, while *Space* (2007) is a stunning water installation of etched glass tanks containing submerged sculptural forms made with sand from the polluted Yamuna River. The etched words are abstract references to questions posed by spirits of the lake in a chapter from the *Mahabharata*. The artist refocuses attention on water as an everyday commodity with a sense of fragility and sacredness, aspects often lost in an industrialised society.

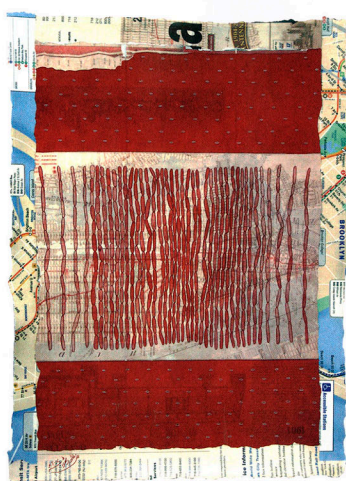
Bose Krishnamachari's work revolves around the transitions and the impermanence of Mumbai street life. His recent series of large-scale portraits in aluminium-cast frames accent the invisibility of an average 'Mumbaikar', as in *Mumbaiya* (2008), based on an image of an actual worker. *Ghost/Transmemoir* (2006-8) comprises 108 tiffin lunch tins embedded with LCD screens, projecting numerous interviews of residents across the strata of Mumbai society. It is a vibrant manifestation that captures the chaos and movement of the city.



Page 52-5: Sana Arjumand, *I am Flexible. Are You?*, 2006.

This page, clockwise from top left: Bose Krishnamachari, *Mumbaiya*, 2008; Atul Bhalla, *MCD Taps*, 2007; Riyas Komu, *Watching the Other World Spirits from the Gardens of Babylon*, 2008.

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Also gaining ground internationally is a new force of artists of Pakistani origin who are grappling with concerns of nationhood and identity against a background of current political disquiet. Their voices respond to the issues in a wealth of styles. New York-based Talha Rathore trained in miniature painting and techniques; she tackles themes of displacement and migration, as part of the diaspora and as a Pakistani Muslim. Her New York subway maps overlaid with organic forms on gouache are infused with traditional motifs throughout. Others combining age-old methods with highly individual approaches include Mohammed Zeeshan, Imran Qureshi, Tazeen Qayyum and Hasnat Mehmood. Naiza Khan's subversive exploration of the paternalistic and authoritarian role of the state considers the dualities of touch and concealment by isolating the body from the woman. From the standpoints of both Eastern Islamic and Western traditions, Khan questions society's preordained suppression in her assertive series *Armour - Corset* (2007). By enveloping the female form in select materials, she speaks of protection and defence, alongside tiers of taboos and the unattainable that requires peeling away. Sana Arjumand utilises the colours and the star and crescent moon of the Pakistani flag throughout her work in witty and emblematic ways. In *I am Flexible. Are You?* (2006) (see pages 52-5) they become a blatant, pacifying command.

Surgings prices in the art market have propelled some contemporary South Asian artists to the forefront of the scene. It is a market buoyed by several different factors, but written reports have concentrated largely on the increases of value, and have rarely focused on the art and its context. As a result, established collectors and curators have tended to approach with trepidation. But change is afoot: more platforms for the artists in international galleries, museums, exhibitions and art fairs and have created a craving for information and a desire to see as much as



Far left: Talha Rathore, *Seeking, Sleeping, Spreading IV*, 2007; left: Naiza Khan, *Armour - Corset*, 2007; below: Sonia Khurana, still from the film *Zootopia*, 2001.

possible. Apart from those artists who now command prices at stratospheric levels, most of the strong work by both established and emerging artists still costs much less than its counterparts elsewhere, making it highly attractive. Artists in their studios across the subcontinent are now having to adjust to the sudden flow of collectors, patrons and curatorial groups from international museums and foundations, galleries, art advisers and press.

'voices respond to the issues in a range of styles'

This summer, collector Frank Cohen mounted a display of contemporary Indian art, and collectors Charles Saatchi and Claude Berri are also preparing exhibitions. Meanwhile, institutions such as Tokyo's Mori Art Museum and London's Serpentine Gallery are also scheduling shows. Again in London, galleries dedicated to art from the region, such as Aicon, Green Cardamom, Rob Dean Fine Art and Grosvenor Vardehra, continue to run focused programmes, while galleries with more international coverage have also begun to represent some prominent Indian artists. This obviously increases interest in the South Asian art scene. One can only hope that the focus will be not simply on a handful of successful names, but that attention on the quality and diversity of other artists from the region will become more widespread. ♥

